

The technical language of economics has become more prevalent in justifying political decision-making

Dave O'Brien argues that the technocratic process of economic decision-making is increasingly being used to give legitimacy to policy decisions. However, the use of particular measurement systems reflects ideological positions, social conditions and bureaucratic histories.



One of the first decisions taken by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) under the coalition in June 2010 was to [end funding](#) for several projects and policies, including the previous administration's Free Swimming programme. The decision was justified using evidence from an economic evaluation of the programme.

Economics can be tremendously useful for policymakers, but as the discipline of economics comes under [increasing scrutiny](#) it is important to understand its uses and limits within UK democracy. The decision to end Free Swimming suggests that, against the backdrop of continuing financial crisis and recession, it is crucial to understand economics as a way of justifying, and potentially depoliticising, difficult decisions.

The Free Swimming programme began in April 2009, as a cross Whitehall initiative between DCMS and the Departments for Health (DH), Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), Work and Pensions (DWP) and Communities and Local Government (DCLG), with additional investment from the Amateur Swimming Association (ASA) and Sport England (SE).

The £140 million, 2 year, programme aimed to assist local authorities to provide a free swimming for all aged under 16 and over 60. The programme also involved swimming lessons and a modest capital fund for improving swimming facilities in participating local authorities. The programme had a wide take up, with 261 local authorities participating in some way.

The publicly discussed logic behind the end of the programme was a straightforward cost/benefit ratio. The minister for sport, Hugh Robertson, was explicit in his use of the language of economic evaluation to justify removing funding for the programme, both [in the House of Commons](#):

'The figures show that there is an 83% dead weight, and that does not, I am afraid, represent value for money.'

And as part of DCMS's [announcement](#):

'The research shows that the great majority of free swimmers were swimming already, and would have paid to swim anyway.'

In the Commons, Robertson was initially reticent to view the decision in party political terms, preferring to look to the 'objective' evaluation of free swimming by PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PWC). [PWC's evaluation](#) of the programme found significant levels of additional swims for those aged over 60 (1.5 million in 2009/10) and under 16 (5.5 million in 2009/10). Whilst PWC were keen

to stress the need for caution when considering the cost-benefit ratios of the programme, the fundamental problem with the policy, based on PWC's findings, was a very high level of deadweight. Thus, according to PWC, 82.5 per cent of over 60s who went for additional swims *would have swum anyway*, even if it was not free.

Free Swimming was an easy target for attempts to reduce expenditure in a seemingly rational way, as the programme's evaluation suggested it had not been especially effective. Within this decision the use of the term 'deadweight' is of particular interest. The coalition could have cited a range of reasons for the decision to end the programme, but gave primacy to the 'deadweight' argument. Economics was used to present the decision as a rational application of social science, in terms of both accounting for the decision and providing the rhetoric to explain the decision. Hence the decision to scrap the policy was presented as being as much a technical as it was a political decision.

The use of economics, including techniques such as cost-benefit analysis, would seem to be an eminently rational approach for a policy maker. The allocation of scarce resources is one of the key questions for political decisions and is the foundation for the tools, drawn from economics, used to calculate cost-benefit ratios. Although this rationality is very persuasive, it is useful to remember that the use of measurement systems reflects ideological positions, social conditions and bureaucratic histories.

The use of the economic case to legitimise the Free Swimming decision has its most obvious parallel in healthcare, where economic tools have been used to assist [controversial decisions](#) over medical technologies, which have thrown the economic question of limited resources and infinite wants into sharp relief. The technocratic process of economic decision-making can give legitimacy to a decision as it is removed from an individual professional's hands to a broader governmental body based on objective, positivist economic calculations as to the cost effectiveness of any given technology.

The coalition sees spending cuts as an essential tool to reduce the budget deficit. It is therefore likely that we will see more decisions presented as technical exercises, particularly in light of the fact that 'economics and finance does often drive policy, and in the UK case as a result of history, institutional power and the accidents of politics, the treasury has a dominant role in key decision-making' ([Thain and Christie 2009:2](#)). In keeping with the kind of debates that took place over evidence based policy under New Labour, identifying the rhetoric of positivist, technical aides to decisions can help us to remember the political rather than the technocratic nature of government spending decisions. This is the critical task when facing a Whitehall narrated in [economistic](#) terms.

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About the author

Dave O'Brien is a Lecturer in Cultural Industries at [City University London](#). His work on cultural value includes a recent secondment and [report](#) to the UK's Department for Culture Media and Sport. His work on urban cultural policy can be found in his PhD from the University of Liverpool, which explored the governance of the European Capital of Culture programme and cultural policy in Liverpool and Newcastle Gateshead. He has published several papers on this topic and is currently developing a book on the subject.

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